EDITORIAL

Anna Moorhouse

*University of British
Columbia Library*

When the Doors Close: Using Storytelling to Promote Academic Library Services in a Remote Environment

Crafting a Compelling Story

I n mid-March 2020, the physical branches of the University of British Columbia Library (UBC Library) closed temporarily in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. During those first few months, library services shifted dramatically as librarians and library staff developed new online programming, managed an increased volume of web archiving and deposits into UBC's institutional depository (cIRcle), worked to quickly supplement the library's electronic collections, and found new ways to help faculty make their course materials available online.

We at the library learned that even when our physical spaces were inaccessible, the library's services, collections, and programs could be adapted to suit a new environment to support our patrons. We also discovered just how critical those services are within a remote academic environment, where patrons must rely on the online services provided by the library to continue their research and studies. As University Librarian Dr. Susan E. Parker noted in her Report to the Senate for the 2020/2021 fiscal year: "The past year has demonstrated, perhaps as no other, that the expertise, collections and programmed spaces offered by UBC Library are indispensable in supporting the missions of teaching, research and learning that are the heart of UBC."

To promote these changes, our communications team created the three-part series, "Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19" (Moorhouse 2021c), which was published on the library's website starting in May 2020. Our team's initial aim in publishing these stories was entirely practical—we needed to get the word out about the new and adapted services available to our faculty, staff, and students. We needed our patrons to know that the doors were closed, but our librarians and library staff continued to be available and ready to support the campus community using our most effective communications tool: storytelling.

I joined UBC Library in 2017 after several years working on marketing teams in financial services and the tech sector. Over the course of a decade, I have watched the rise of storytelling in digital marketing as the format of choice in customer testimonials, case studies, blog posts, and other content marketing pieces.

> "Whether you are promoting library workshops or selling software, narrative communication works because it builds trust and conveys information in a way that is easier for your target audience to process."

While the switch from private sector to academic communications presented its own unique learning curve for me, I found that the basic tenets of effective content marketing remain the same: whether you are promoting library workshops or selling software, narrative communication works because it builds trust and conveys information in a way that is easier for your target audience to process. A 2014 study published in PNAS, which examined narrative formats in science communications, suggests that information that is delivered in a narrative format is often associated with increased recall, ease of comprehension, and shorter reading times: "In a direct comparison with expository text, narrative text was read twice as fast and recalled twice as well, regardless of topic familiarity or interest in the content itself" (Dahlstrom 2014).

Specialized services need simple promotion solutions

Looking at libraries, particularly research and academic libraries, the services and programs we offer are not always straightforward: what we promote is often specialized and sometimes conceptually new to our patrons. Workshops on research data management, copyright services, or scholarly communication are vital offerings, but are frequently steeped in jargon. Moreover, the library audience who would most benefit from these services often will not be familiar with the terminology and could miss key learning opportunities as a result.

For example, this year our library gained access to a comprehensive database of housing values (Moorhouse 2021d). The database is only accessible to UBC researchers and only through our library, thanks to the work of our librarians in negotiating the licensing agreement and converting this data into a user-friendly format. In interviewing the librarians involved, I learned quite a bit about markup languages, data distribution, and licensing, but I still needed to know how the campus community could make practical use of the database. Because of the technical nature of the resource, getting the word out about this database to the campus community was not straightforward.

The value of this converted database was that researchers in humanities and business fields could now access the data without having to hire computer science students to make sense of it first. It was a complex sell that needed to become a simpler story, which we crafted by speaking with researchers who were already working with the data and who could tell us about their work and the potential they saw for future use cases. Through the quotes we collected in these interviews, we could simplify our story to use terms and ideas that our target audience in the humanities and related faculties would recognize and understand.

So many services, too little time

While the relative complexity of library offerings is certainly a notable challenge for library communication teams, often the bigger challenge is when you are tasked with promoting many related services at once. As Karen Mazurkewich notes so clearly in her *Harvard Business Review* article: "It's not easy to tell straightforward stories about complicated topics. But the solution isn't to cram all the ideas into one story or release. In fact, given that readers' attention spans are getting shorter, it's essential to follow this rule: Keep it simple" (Mazukewich 2018).

This was the case for our story series during the first year of the pandemic.

As the second-largest academic research library in Canada, UBC Library has 15 branches and divisions, which our communications team of four—director, manager, design specialist, and coordinator—serves using a client-based model. As the Communications and Marketing Manager at UBC Library, my role is often that of hunter and gatherer: checking in with unit and branch heads to

cultivate a steady flow of notable new services, resources, acquisitions, and achievements that need to be promoted to the campus community and often beyond campus.

The basic narrative framework I use to develop our library service stories is based on a classic three-act story arc with a clear beginning, middle and end—though the arcs are not always laid out as linear narratives, thanks to devices like flashbacks and flashforwards.

The framework also draws on elements from other well-known structures, including the simplified hero's journey and the CARL framework, which we'll explore in more detail.

Developing a narrative format for library communications

The most popular narrative structure in marketing communications is undoubtedly the hero's journey. Many organizations use a simplified version of Joseph Campbell's original 17-step hero's journey, popularized in his work on comparative mythology *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1949). The simplified journey tends to distill the steps down to a three-act arc through which the hero leaves the ordinary world behind, learns to navigate an unfamiliar and special world, and then returns to the ordinary world, newly transformed by their experiences (see Figure 1).

Three-Act Structure

Act I	Act II	Act III
Beginning	Middle	End
Set-up	Confrontation	Resolution

CARL Framework

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Beginning	Middle	End	Afterword
Context	Action	Results	Learning

Simplified Hero's Journey

Act I	Act II	Act III
Beginning	Middle	End
Departure	Initiation	Return
Ordinary World	Special World	Ordinary World 2.0

Figure 1: Detailed view of three types of narrative structures.

With the push toward user-centric marketing, the titular "hero" in most content marketing pieces is the customer or patron, who undergoes a journey that is made possible with the help of the product or service being promoted. That product or service is cast as a mentor figure who provides guidance that enables the hero to slay their own dragon.

The CARL framework (McCabe and Thejll-Madsen 2018) is best known as a job interviewing technique, but it has many similarities to the simplified hero's journey. CARL is an acronym that stands for context (setting the scene), action (explaining the actions taken), results (showing what happened as a result of those actions), and learning (talking about what was learned). This framework is reflective in nature and offers the chance to take a longer view of the narrative arc in the fourth "learning" act, which allows space to reflect back on the action or results, or project into the future (see Figure 1).

Building our remote services story series

In the "Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19" (Moorhouse 2021c) series, we built our stories on the idea of the ordinary vs. special worlds, and a fairly straightforward arc which moved from a contextual introduction, to the action, a result, and then either to a type of epilogue that looks forward to future projects or services, or an afterword in which the narrative's events are enriched with additional context and reflection (see Figure 2).

The first story in our series (Blackwell 2020) laid out the details for the new and adapted services which had launched in the short few weeks after our physical branches had closed, and included testimonial quotes from patrons—students, staff, and faculty—who talked about the specific support they received from our librarians. We also included quotes from personnel at the library, who could speak to the rationale behind some of the decisions that were made in offering these new services.

Series framework: "Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19"

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Beginning	Middle	End	Afterword
Context	Action	Results	Learning
Ordinary World	*Special World*	*Ordinary World 2.0*	*Future World*

Figure 2: Series framework for "Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19"

Due to time constraints, we needed to communicate many disparate service changes, quickly, to our patrons who were facing the start of a fully-remote term. But in our next installment (Moorhouse 2021b), which was written and published one year later, we wanted a space to recognize the efforts of our staff and reflect on a year of massive changes. More importantly, we needed to remind the wider university community that we had been here the whole time, supporting their teaching, learning, and research.

With so much ground to cover in the next story, including many large, complex services that had been engineered over the course of several months and tailored to address the knowledge gaps created by the new remote learning environment, we made the decision to split the next story in two and give everything more room to breathe. Our follow-up became a double-feature and our series became a trilogy.

The resulting publications, "How UBC Library has provided safe study spaces on campus" (Moorhouse 2021b), and "How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help" (Moorhouse 2021a), were written in tandem but published a month apart. The services depicted in each story are related thematically: the safe study space story focused on the library services at Irving K. Barber Learning Centre (IKBLC), which was one of the only buildings on campus open at UBC at that time with study spaces available to students. The final story focused on our materials pick-up service, which made the physical collections accessible to patrons through a controlled ordering and book retrieval process, and the launch of virtual drop-in reference help.

Let's break down the structure of the second story (see Figure 3)

In this case, the story follows a linear narrative. In the beginning, I provide context: the story starts in September 2020, just after IKBLC opens back up to students. Rigorous safety and cleaning protocols are in place, and students can book study spaces through a system online and check in at the front doors. The building is open and services are functional. Then our action occurs—new

Story framework: "How UBC Library has provided safe study spaces on campus" (April 2021)

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Beginning	Middle	End	Afterword
Context	Action	Results	Learning
The IKBLC space is open, with rigorous safety and cleaning protocols	New needs arise! - Students need to print - Students need space for remote exams - Ref. questions landing at security desk	Met those needs: - Launched Print pick-up - Set hours based on first/last exam times - Stationed library personnel at front door	With planned return to on-campus activity, the IKBLC team is looking at what needs to be in place to open up further.
Ordinary World	*Special World*	*Ordinary World 2.0*	*Future World*
IKBLC is open and functioning	*IKBLC has unforeseen service gaps*	*IKBLC is open and functioning with new services*	*What's next?*

Figure 3: Story framework for "How UBC Library has provided safe spaces on campus"

needs arise. Library staff discover that some students are booking study spaces simply so they can enter the building to print documents. Then the library does a survey of 400 students who had previously booked spaces and finds that fifty percent of those students surveyed were planning to write their exams at IKBLC, which is a notable change in the regular student cycle for the space. Finally, library staff find that students are bringing their questions—about printing, book returns, and academic resource help—to security staff because security is stationed at the front door, whereas the reference desk is all the way on Level 3.

In our results, or resolution, third act, I write about how the library is meeting these newly identified needs by launching new services including: a printing pick-up service, where students can order their document prints online and pick them up at the front door; by setting building hours based on exam times to accommodate students who need a quiet, safe space to write those exams; and by changing up the space configuration and hiring additional student library staff to be at the front door near the security desk to provide peer-to-peer assistance and referrals.

The afterword in our story looks forward to the next stages of reopening for the building, and how the IKBLC team is making plans.

Let's do the same deconstruction for the third story.

Story framework: "How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help" (May 2021)

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Afterword *(Flashback)*	Beginning *(Truncated)*	Middle	End
Learning	Context	Action	Results
It's been over a year since the pandemic began and the library continues to adapt its spaces and services in new ways	Students are accessing physical collections, reference services and attending in-person workshops	Physical collections are inaccessible, drop-in reference hours are down to email only, and in person workshops not possible.	Materials Pick-up service launched, virtual drop-in hours offered at branches and other units, writing consultations and workshops moved online.
Ordinary World	*Special World*	*Ordinary World 2.0*	*Future World*
What's next?	*Physical branches are open and operating as normal*	*Branches close temporarily because of COVID-19*	*Physical branches still closed but operating with new services*

Figure 3: Story framework for "How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help"

For this story, our structure is shifted and non-linear. The story starts in the future world (at that time, May 2021), recounting that it has been over a year since the UBC community transitioned to remote teaching, learning, and research. Only then do we jump back in time to the original "Ordinary World" and resume a linear narrative, centering the story at the moment when the action begins.

With this structure, we provide only minimal context and include a truncated Act II, since our readers are already familiar with the context. Also, because this is the third story in our series, we are not required to recap much—instead we can link out to the previous stories in the series and invite our readers to catch up if needed. This allows us to devote more time in our third story to the Action and Results.

Since we established that Act III is a flashback to the past, and the Action begins in March 2020 when physical branches close temporarily, our Action occurs when the physical collections become suddenly inaccessible because of the temporary closures of the library's branches. In our final act, we show our Results: the library launches a materials pick-up service, so patrons can order their books online from the physical collections and pick them up safely in person, on campus. Similarly, reference hours, workshops, and consultations disappear during the action and then reappear in virtual formats.

Since our hybrid story format relies heavily on the simplified hero's journey, it is worth noting who exactly is the "hero" in these stories. We purposefully chose to cast the library staff and librarians as our story heroes as they were the ones who encountered the challenges. These staff and faculty members encounter challenges and make the changes necessary for the happy resolutions in the end. These are essentially their stories and it is through the interviews we did with them that we are able to tell these stories at all.

Getting the word out

Developing a content marketing story is only part of the work of promoting library services: finding an audience for the story after publication is just as important. If a story is posted on the internet, but no one reads it, has it even really been published?

To find such an audience, our communication team's editorial process relies on strategic amplification and cross-promotion. We try to leverage existing relationships to reach as much of our target audience as we can. For us, these relationships include UBC's central and internal communications teams, as well as other faculties and departments across campus. In all cases, we stick closely to each unit's individual submission guidelines and editorial preferences to maximize the chance that our submissions will be accepted and to minimize the amount of editing these teams may need to do before the story can go live on their platforms. Of course, not all our pitches are accepted, but it is always worth asking, especially when we feel our story will be relevant to the wider audiences on their channels.

Research the related units or community groups who may have an interest in the services you are promoting with your story. Do these groups have an e-newsletter, social media accounts, or event calendars where they accept external pitches? If they do, send them a short email pitch and include hyperlinks in your email that refer directly to the social posts you want them to reshare, or a toolkit with image assets in common sizes and pre-written newsletter copy.

Look for evergreen venues where your content can be excerpted or reposted to remain relevant even after the campaign period has ended. Because our story series had an element of looking back on a significant historical time for

our institution, these stories were not just promotional, but documentative. We reached out to the UBC Strategic Plan team who reposted our stories on their website as examples of UBC's Strategic Plan in Action, where they continue to live, generating new views and visits to our website.

Getting good quotes to craft your story dialogue

A story generally needs to create a balance between the arc of the narrative, character dialogue (which is used to move the story further), and a depiction of key scenes through description. As applied to narrative communications content, you want to keep the story moving forward with dialogue, in the form of quotes from interviewees. These should be carefully chosen and placed within the story to create momentum, and any exposition or descriptive passages must always serve an identifiable purpose.

Go a little deeper into dialogue: let your "characters" speak with their own voices as much as possible. When I conduct interviews with our librarians or library partners for a story, I do it live. Sometimes, if they have a definite preference about sending in a quote over email, I am happy to accommodate that, but I get the best insights when I have a conversation. Now that video call meetings are standard practice in remote working arrangements, it has become so much easier and more common to ask if I can record the conversation while on a platform like Zoom.

After the interview, I create an audio transcript so I can go through our conversation with a digital highlighter to pick out the most relevant quotes. Then when I am crafting the story, I try to let my interviewees speak for themselves: I leave quotes as intact as I can and try to minimize paraphrasing.

Perhaps most importantly, I send the full draft back to each interviewee once it is ready, so everyone can review not only their own quotes, but can see them within the larger context of the story. This practice is different than what a journalist with a media outlet might do after an interview, as people quoted in news articles rarely get to vet their quotes or even see the story in advance of publication. However, in content marketing, our purpose is not simply to report what is happening, but to frame the story. Upon review, interviewees will sometimes want to tweak their quotes so that the story can be included in grant proposals, faculty newsletters, or donor relations. Through these stories, we not only promote the library, but also its people, and so it is important we have buy-in from everyone involved and that the people quoted in these stories can feel proud of their involvement.

Images speak louder than words

While we did not have the option to do a photoshoot for the first story in our series, we did take the time to create original graphics to use in our promotional materials for the story. For the final two stories in the series, which focused more heavily on physical spaces that were open and operating, our team made the effort to set up photoshoots onsite to capture both the spaces and the people working in those spaces.

It is much easier to amplify stories when you can provide high-quality, original images as part of your marketing package: your story is more likely to be reshared online and more likely to be read if it includes an eye-catching image. Accordingly, we used photos in several other publications, including our annual report, so the time and effort our team spent setting up the shoots, despite the extra (but necessary) hoops our photographer and director had to go through to do so, was more than worth it.

What's next?

While the pandemic continues to have an outsized effect on our library operations and services, our story series will likely continue as well, with new entries that chronicle how our staff and faculty rise to the challenge. Perhaps one day soon we will be able to cap off the series with a retrospective that captures how much UBC Library has permanently changed as a result of the events of the past two years, and how the services that were developed, sometimes in haste, and always out of necessity, have been refined and enhanced to better serve our university community into the future.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Anna Moorhouse, Communications and Marketing Manager, University of British Columbia Library: anna.moorhouse@ubc.ca